



**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION**

**RESULTS FROM THE  
SURVEY OF VETERANS SATISFACTION WITH THE  
C&P APPEAL PROCESS:**

**Implications for the Post-Decision Review Program**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Veterans in the post-decision review (PDR) stations reported the time it took to get a decision from VA following the notice of disagreement to be longer than those veterans in the control stations. However, there was little difference between the groups in veterans' assessment of how *reasonable* this time was.
- Veterans in the PDR stations were more likely than those in the control stations to get their appeal granted. They were also less likely to have their appeal sent to BVA than veterans in the control stations.
- There was little overall difference between veterans in the control stations and veterans in the PDR stations when asked about overall satisfaction of the appeals process.
- For those veterans in the PDR stations, those (or with their representative) who had spoken directly or met with a VA employee were more satisfied with the appeal process than those who did not speak directly or met with a VA employee.
- Those veterans with a granted appeal in the PDR stations were more satisfied with the overall appeals process than those veterans with a granted appeal in the control stations. However, those veterans with a denied appeal in the PDR stations were less satisfied than those veterans with a denied appeal in the control stations.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In December 1996, the Veterans Benefits Administration's Compensation and Pension (C&P) Service issued a report on Reengineering Claims Processing with a new vision for handling veterans' disability compensation and pension claims. This business process reengineering (BPR) effort identified new goals, with the focus above all on service to the veteran. In an effort to meet these new goals, fundamental changes in claims processing had to be made. VBA felt it necessary to make the veteran a partner in the claims process. With this goal in mind, C&P developed a position called a Veterans Service Representative (VSR) who would be in contact with both the veteran and the VSO service representative to provide information on eligibility and guide the veteran through the application process in a timely manner. Knowing that in some cases the veteran will be dissatisfied with the decision even after guidance through the process by a VSR, it was proposed that a post-decision review (PDR) process be developed. This process calls for the VSR to contact the veteran once the veteran files a notice of disagreement (NOD) to explain the decision and the post-decision review process. If the claimant wishes to initiate the PDR process, a decision review officer (DRO) would be assigned to their case and become the claimant's primary representative. The DRO would have the authority to issue a revised favorable decision based on a review of evidence. If the veteran remains dissatisfied, the DRO can help prepare the veteran's claim for a formal appeal, forwarding the claim to the Board of Veterans Appeals.

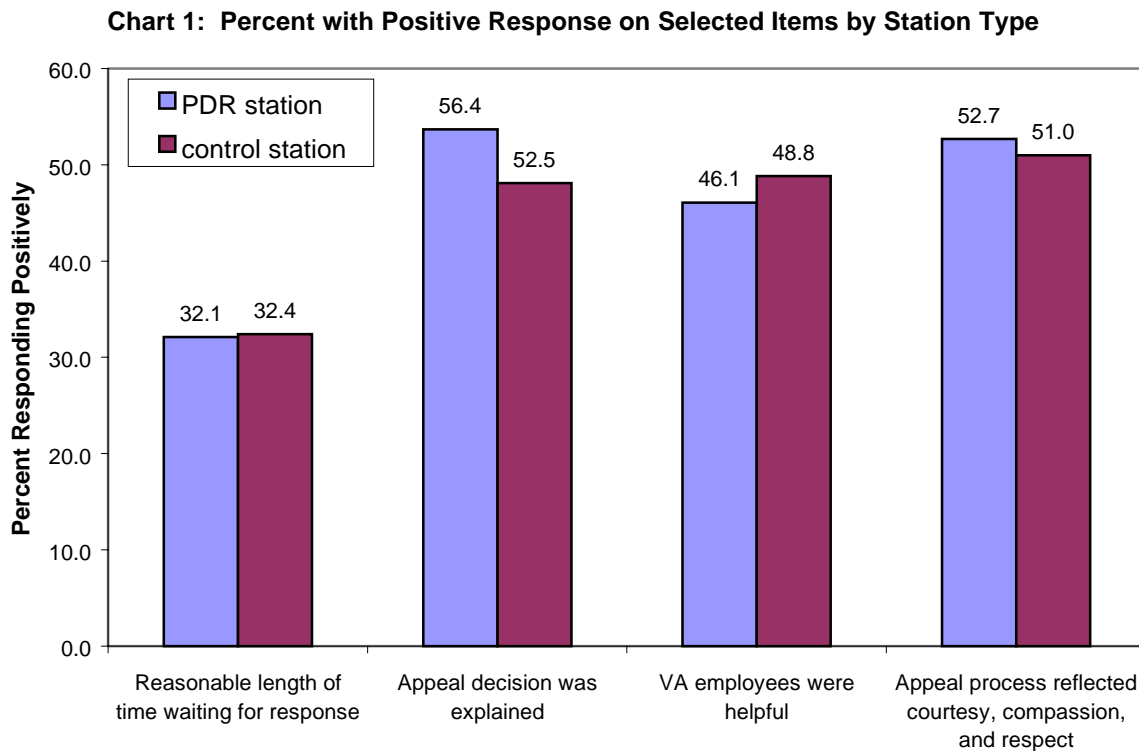
In an attempt to fulfill the vision for improvement of the claims process by 2002, twelve test stations were chosen to implement the PDR process for one year, starting in December of 1997. Under the auspices of Compensation and Pension Service, VBA's Surveys and Research Staff was asked to conduct a customer satisfaction survey to measure the success of the DRO process in these 12 stations. During the early summer of 1998, the staff drafted a questionnaire including items such as courtesy, timeliness, satisfaction with the decision, helpfulness, and understanding of the appeals process, which might be affected by the PDR process.

## METHODOLOGY

Data collection began on August 12, 1998 and the receipt questionnaires was completed the end of October. A random sample of veterans who had filed a NOD and received a decision in regards to the NOD (i.e. statement of the case or a full grant) was gathered from 7 PDR stations and 7 control station (stations who had not implemented the PDR process). The PDR stations included Nashville, Pittsburgh, St. Petersburg, Philadelphia, Seattle, Waco and Portland. (These stations were selected from the 12 test stations by C&P Service as they were thought to be farther along and more consistent in carrying out the PDR process). The control stations included Indianapolis, Wichita, Louisville, Cleveland, St. Louis, Lincoln, and Chicago. A total of 1400 surveys were mailed (100 to each of 14 stations). The survey instrument sent to those veterans in the control group contained 21 questions, and the instrument sent to the veterans in the PDR group contained 23 questions. The estimated time to complete the survey was 10 minutes. A cover letter and a stamped return envelope accompanied the survey instrument. A reminder post card was mailed 4 weeks after the survey instrument was fielded. The total number of questionnaires with complete addresses was 1370, and 698 completed questionnaires were returned, yielding a 51 percent response rate. There were 354 completed questionnaires returned from PDR stations and 344 completed questionnaires returned from control stations. Because of the relatively small number of respondents per regional office, comparisons cannot be made among individual regional offices. Also, given these sample sizes, percentages of approximately five percent or more are needed to show “true” differences between the PDR and the control stations as a group.

## SURVEY RESULTS

### Selected Factors by Station Type



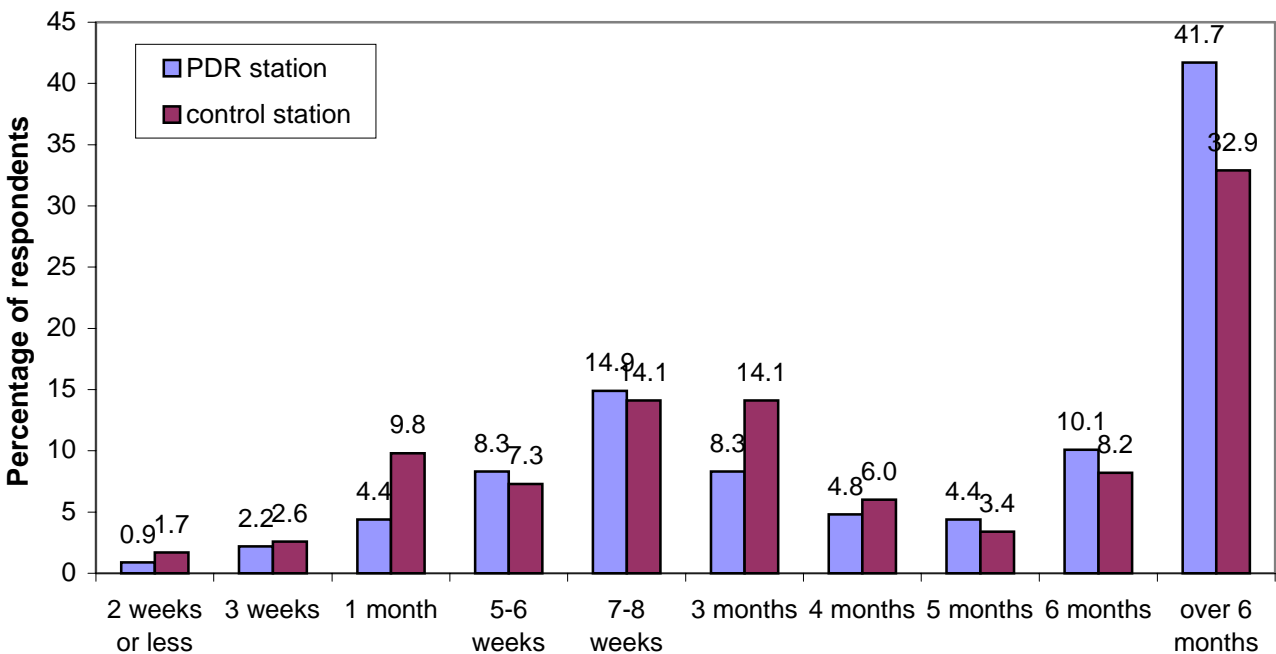
After they had filed a notice of disagreement, veterans in the PDR stations responded in a similar manner to veterans in the control stations when asked about how reasonable the amount of time was that they had to wait for a response; whether or not the decision on their appeal was explained; the helpfulness of VA employees; and the courtesy, compassion and respect reflected in the appeal process (refer to chart 1). There was virtually no difference between the control stations and the PDR stations in the reasonableness of the amount of time that they waited for a decision on their appeal; 32.4 percent of the control and 32.1 percent of the PDR station respondents thought that the amount of time they waited for a decision on their appeal was reasonable. The appeal decision was explained in a way the veteran could understand for 56.4 percent of veterans in the PDR stations and 52.5 percent of the veterans in the control stations. Of veterans in the PDR station, 46.1 percent perceived the VA employees as helpful, while 48.8 percent of veterans in the control stations perceived VA employees as helpful. The appeal process reflected courtesy,

compassion and respect for 52.7 percent of the veterans in the PDR stations and 51.0 percent of veterans in the control stations.

Except for a slight increase in explaining the appeal process in a way the veteran could understand, there appears to be little positive difference for the PDR stations on these selected items. It should also be noted that there were few differences in the PDR and control stations when veterans rated the claims process *prior* to filing a notice of disagreement.

### Length of Time to Receive Decision

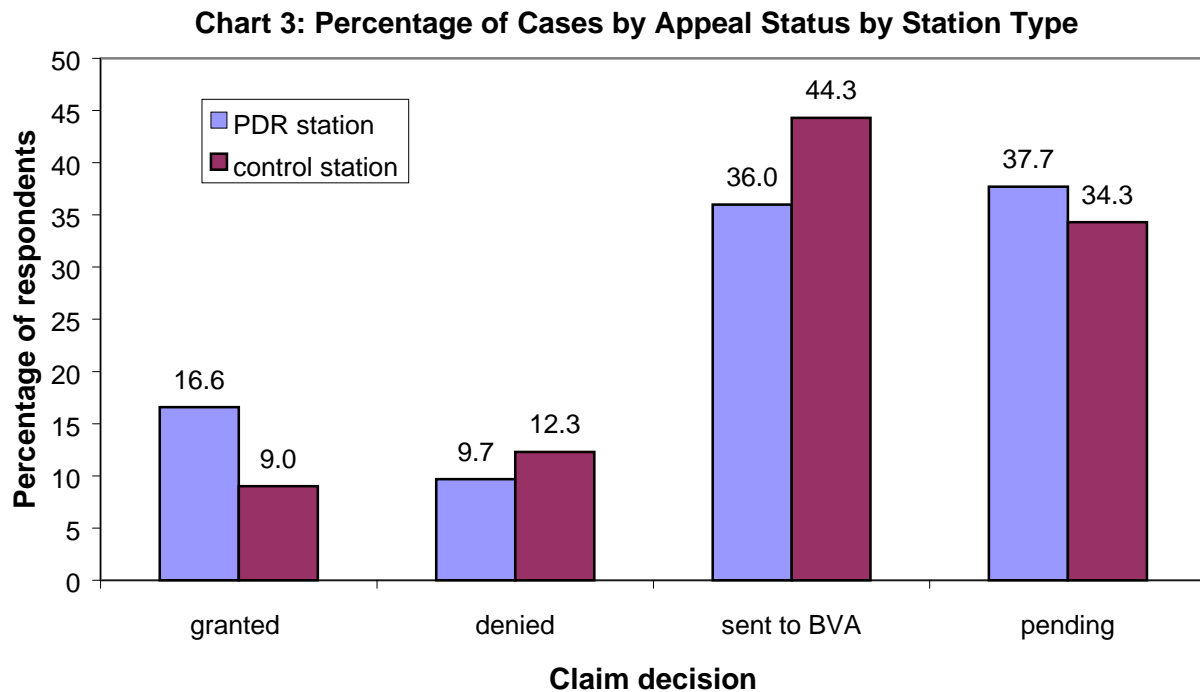
**Chart 2: Percentage Distribution by Length of Time to Receive a Decision by Station Type**



When asked about timeliness of the appeal decision, veterans in the PDR stations reported the process to be longer than veterans in the control stations (refer to chart 2). Specifically, 39.0 percent of the veterans in the PDR stations reported they received a decision within three months, while 49.6 percent of veterans in the control station reported they received a decision on their claim within this time frame. Further, 51.8 percent of veterans in the PDR stations reported the decision taking 6 months or more, while only 41.1 percent of the veterans in the control stations reported the decision taking 6 months or more. On average the veterans from the PDR stations reported it took

18.5 weeks to get a decision on their claim, while veterans from the control stations reported that it took 16.5 weeks.

## Status of Appeal

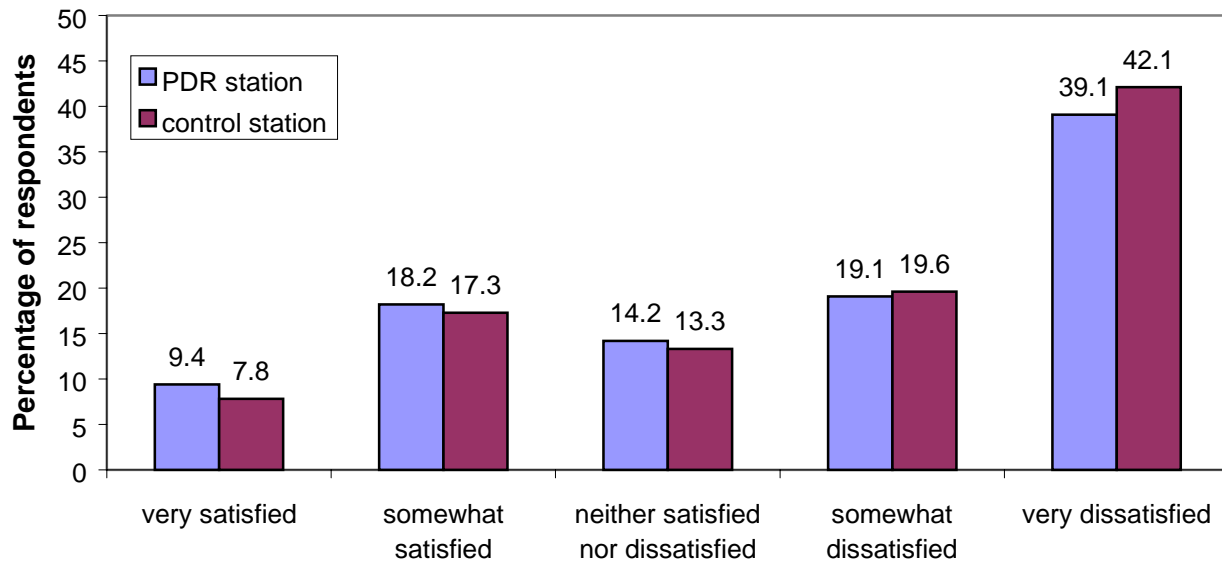


Veterans in the PDR stations were more likely to get their appeal granted than those veterans in the control stations (refer to chart 3). More specifically, 16.6 percent of veterans in the PDR station had their appeal granted, while only 9.0 percent of veterans in the control station had their appeal granted. Control stations were more likely to have their appeal denied, with 12.3 percent of those in the control station with a denied appeal and 9.7 percent of those in the PDR station with a denied appeal. Further, control stations were more likely to forward an appeal to Board of Veterans Appeals than the PDR stations, with 44.3 percent of the appeals from the control stations forwarded to BVA and only 36.0 percent of the appeals from the PDR stations forwarded to BVA. Control stations were less likely than the PDR stations to have pending claims, with 34.3 percent of the control stations appeals pending and 37.7 percent of the PDR stations appeals pending.



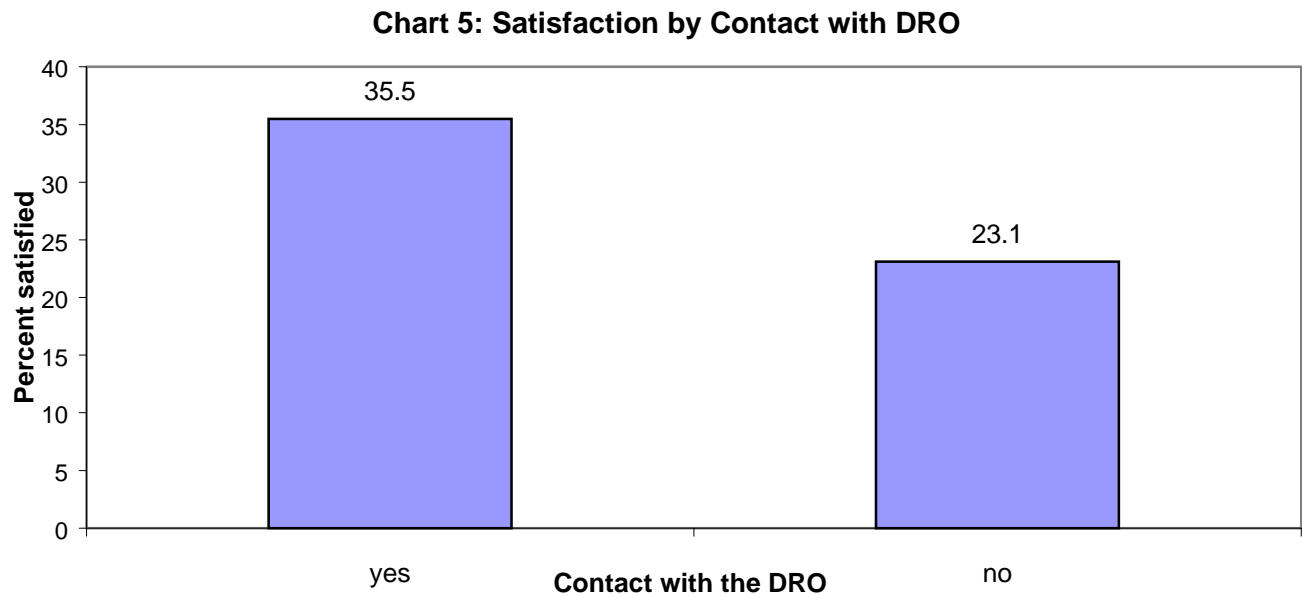
## Post-Decision Review Program's Effect on Overall Satisfaction

**Chart 4: Percentage Distribution by Satisfaction with the Appeals Process by Station Type**



Although PDR stations appear more likely to get their claim granted, there is no difference between veterans' overall satisfaction in the PDR stations versus the control stations (refer to chart 4). Specifically, 27.6 percent of veterans in the PDR stations were either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the process and 25.1 percent of veterans in the control stations were either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the appeal process. Many veterans expressed dissatisfaction with the appeals process, with 61.7 percent of the veterans in the control stations expressing being either somewhat or very dissatisfied with the appeals process and 58.2 percent of veterans in the PDR stations being somewhat or very dissatisfied with the appeals process.

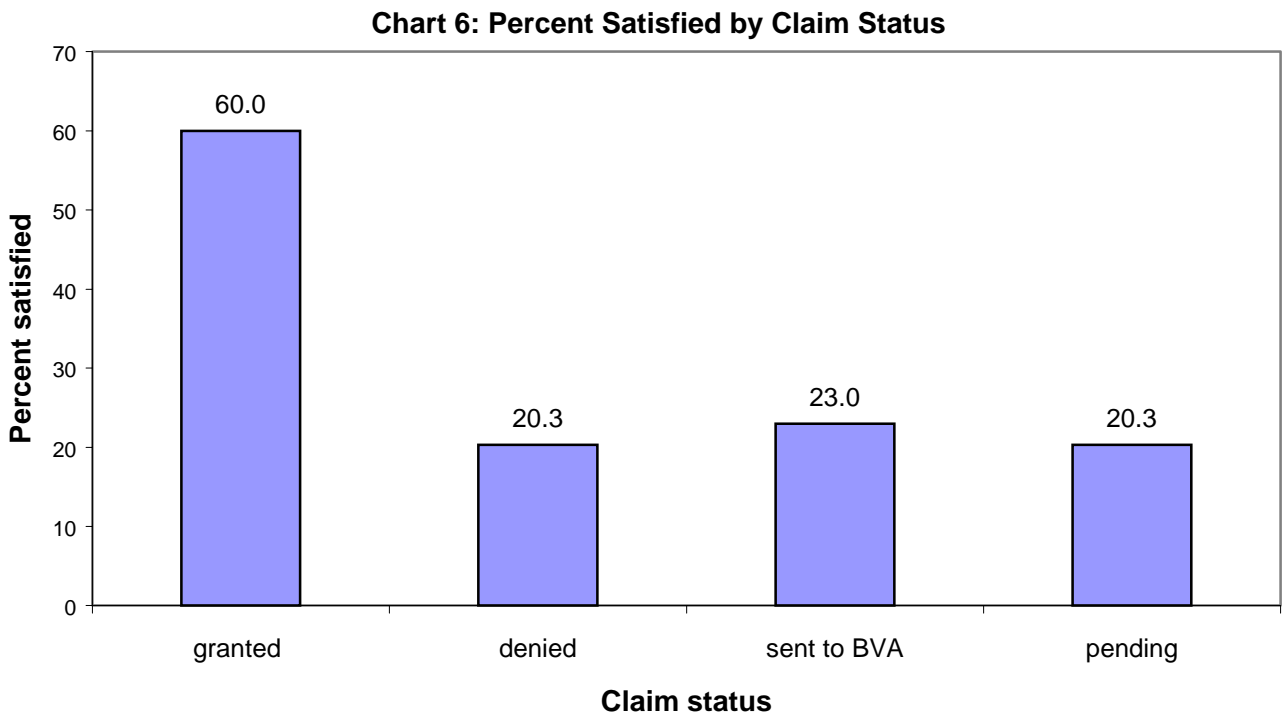
## Contact with a Decision Review Officer (DRO)



Note: PDR Stations only

When looking at the overall satisfaction scores, no difference was found between those veterans whose claim was processed through a PDR station versus those veterans whose claim was processed through a control station. However, veterans (or their representatives) in the PDR stations who had spoken directly or met with a VA Decision Review Officer (DRO), were more satisfied than those veterans in the PDR stations who did not speak or meet with a VA employee (DRO) (refer to chart 5). More specifically, 35.5 percent of the 139 veterans who were in contact with a VA employee during the appeals process were satisfied, while only 23.1 percent of the 178 veterans who were not in contact with a VA employee were satisfied. (There were no significant differences in claim outcome, i.e. granted, pending, or denied by contact status). These findings reveal that if a process is transparent to the veteran (no contact with a VA employee) overall satisfaction of the appeals process is not increased. However, personal contact by the veteran or their representative with a VA employee does increase overall satisfaction with the appeals process.

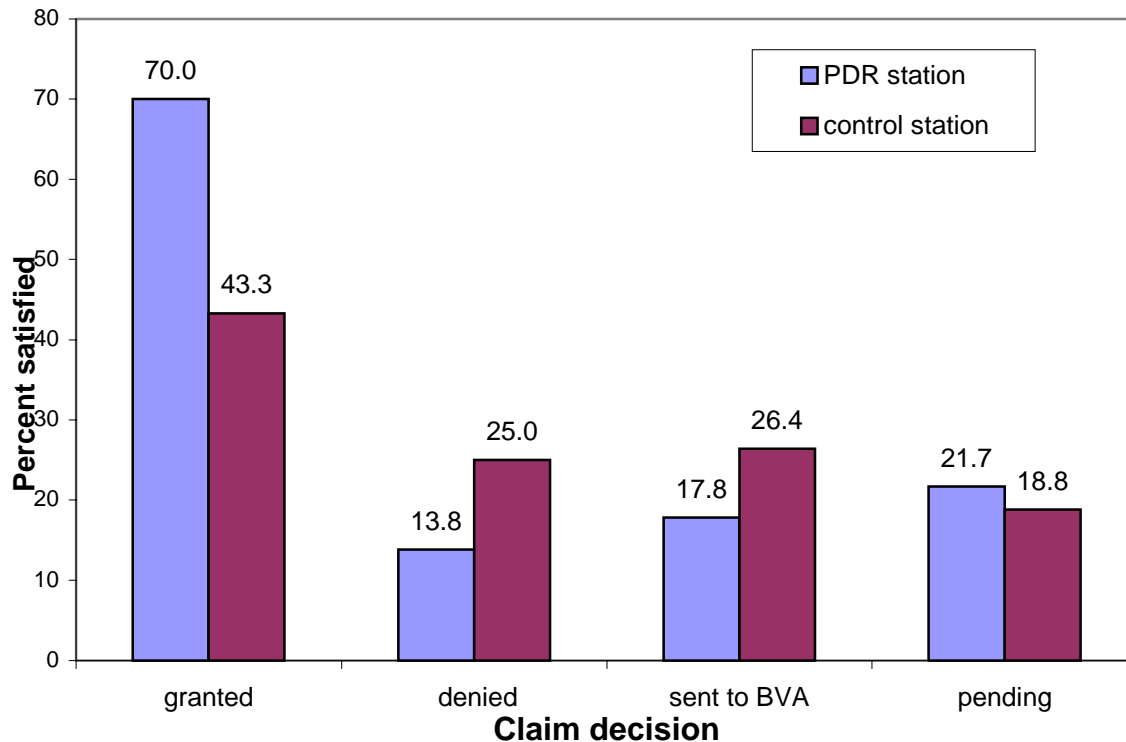
## Satisfaction by Claim Status



Consistent with past findings from the C&P National Survey on veterans satisfaction with the claims process, a granted claim is associated with an increase in veteran's satisfaction with the way VA handled their claim (refer to chart 6). Specifically, 60.0 percent of veterans with a granted claim were satisfied with the overall appeal process, while only 20.3 percent of veterans with a denied claim were satisfied. Of those veterans with a claim sent on to Board of Veterans Appeals, 23.0 percent were satisfied with the overall appeal process, and 20.3 percent of those veterans with a pending claim were satisfied.

## Claim Status by Satisfaction by Station Type

**Chart 7: Veterans' Satisfaction Looking at Decision across Station Type**



When looking at the type of station that the veteran is from (either PDR or control stations), 70.0 percent of those veterans from a PDR station with a granted claim were satisfied, while only 43.3 percent of those from a control station, with a granted claim, were satisfied (refer to chart 7). It is clear that those veterans from the PDR stations with a granted claim were more satisfied than those veterans from a control station whose claim was granted.

However, for those veterans in the PDR stations, 21.7 percent of veterans with a pending claim, 17.8 percent of those with a claim sent to Board of Veterans Appeals and 13.8 percent of veterans with a denied claim were satisfied with the overall appeal process. For those veterans in the control stations, 18.8 percent of veterans with a pending claim, 26.4 percent of those with a claim that was sent to Board of Veterans Appeals, and 25.0 percent of veterans with a denied claim were satisfied with the overall appeal process. Veterans in the PDR stations were more satisfied with a granted claim than those veterans in the control stations. However, veterans with a denied claim or a claim forwarded to BVA in the PDR stations were more dissatisfied with the overall

appeals process than veterans in the control stations. This finding illustrates that the PDR process may raise veterans' expectations that cannot always be met. For those veterans in the PDR stations, a granted claim confirms their expectations of the DRO and their ability to "advocate" for the veteran. However those veterans in the PDR stations with a denied claim or a claim forwarded to BVA may become more dissatisfied with the process, due to their unmet expectations and ineffectiveness of the DRO in getting the claim granted.

### **WHAT DO THESE RESULTS REALLY MEAN?**

At first glance, the results from this survey indicate that the implementation of the new DRO process has little impact on veterans' overall satisfaction with the appeals process. Veterans in the PDR stations are no more likely to be satisfied with the process than those veterans in the control stations regarding the timeliness of the process, whether the decision was explained clearly, the helpfulness of the VA employees, and the courtesy, compassion, and respect reflected in the appeal process. When veterans were asked directly about their overall satisfaction with the appeals process, there was no difference between veterans in the PDR stations and veterans in the control stations. However, when taking a closer look at the veterans' responses to the survey, differences between veterans in the PDR stations and control stations were found. Denied claimants in the control stations were more satisfied with the appeals process than denied claimants in the PDR stations and granted claimants in the PDR stations were more satisfied than granted claimants in the control stations. This finding reveals that veterans in the PDR stations were more dissatisfied when their claim was denied, but were more satisfied when their claim was granted. Therefore, the implementation of the DRO process to all regional offices may affect veterans' overall satisfaction with the appeal process, with denied claimants being more dissatisfied with the appeal process, and granted claimants being more satisfied with the process. The overall effect may be ameliorated somewhat by the fact that the PDR sites are more likely to grant claims.

In addition, veterans in the PDR stations were more satisfied if they or their representative had spoken or met with a DRO directly. The implication of this finding is very important. Veterans who were served by a DRO, but for whom the process is transparent, were less satisfied than those veterans who were aware they are being served by a DRO. Therefore, it is important that the PDR process is not transparent to the veteran and that they or their representative are in contact with a

DRO throughout the appeal process. It may also be important to clearly state to the veteran that the PDR review process will not always result in a full or partial increase in benefits. Clear, direct communication throughout the process may be the key to increasing overall satisfaction for all claimants, regardless of the outcome of the appeal.

**Appendix A: Questionnaire and Response Frequencies for (PDR) Stations**

*(See DRO Questionnaire2freq.doc)*

**Appendix B: Questionnaire and Response Frequencies for Control Stations**

*(See nonDROquestionnaire2freq.doc)*



## **Appendix C: Cover Letter and Reminder Post Card**

## **Appendix D: Verbatim Comments for Test Stations**

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## **Appendix E: Verbatim Comments for Control Stations**

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